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ABSTRACT

With philosophic and theoretical emphases on group learning and individual empowerment, adult education is ideally suited for cooperative learning, particularly in areas such as adult basic education and English as a second language where learners are culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse. Small group learning, with its attendant problems, is often called cooperative. Lacking the essential elements of cooperative learning, such practice usually fails, leading facilitators and learners alike to complain that cooperative learning does not work. To be effective, cooperative learning must contain six elements: individual accountability, group learning and processing goals, group rewards, assigned roles, and well-defined evaluation criteria. (Sample cooperative learning lesson plans are provided on three topics: cultural plurality, community social services, and biology.) (YLB)

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING FOR ABE AND ESL CLASSES: GETTING STARTED

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING FOR ABE AND ESL CLASSES:
GETTING STARTED

Adult education has long touted the use of group processes and empowering learners. It is unfortunate, therefore, that many adult education programs continue to make near exclusive use of individualized instruction ("National Evaluation," 1992) which, while expedient, is less effective than cooperative learning for facilitating group processes, empowering learners, inculcating tolerance for human differences , and enhancing achievement. Cooperative learning offers the additional benefit of developing interpersonal skills which are requisite to success in this modern age. It is particularly effective for use with minorities and with linguistically and academically diverse classes.

Small Group Versus Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is immensely complex and problems are often experienced by the novice who uses small group learning under the misnomer of cooperative learning. Such experiments often end in failure with both learners and facilitators complaining that cooperative learning doesn't work. In fact, properly practiced cooperative models do work. In a meta-analysis of over 600 research studies, Johnson (1989) concluded that, among other benefits, cooperative learning reduces gender and ethnic bias, keeps learners on task, frequently enhances and never inhibits achievement. Educators have found that problems innate to small group learning are eliminated with cooperative education; the problems include:

* Individual members who don't do their share of the work other members who do more than their share, thus enabling inequitable workload distribution;
* Group leaders who emerge because of personality rather than expertise or skill for the task at hand;
* Gender issues that affect the roles members assume;

* Groupthink in which members feel coerced into validating results with which they may not agree;
* Wasted effort due to poor time on task.

Getting Started

Structuring cooperative learning takes dedication, time, creativity, and a willingness on the part of instructors to relinquish control and trust the learners. Adult educators interested in practicing cooperative learning need to integrate six elements into their planning.

Six Elements of a Cooperative Learning Lesson

1. The elements begin with *individual accountability (goals)* . Lessons must be structured so that each group member has responsibility for contributing to the overall group goal.

2. There must be a *group learning goal* that can only be reached when all (two to five) members have contributed to the best of their individual abilities. Individual contributions can be tailored to meet the needs and skills of individuals; it is not essential for all members to perform the same types of tasks. For instance, in the cultural lesson outlined below, one member can read a story, another can draw pictures to enhance the report, a third can watch and verbally report on a relevant video, and one can share some of his/her oral tradition.

3. Third, there must be a *group reward.* Sometimes the reward is as simple as a sack of candy or the group name prominently displayed. Group grades are effective motivators but should probably be used sparingly or in conjunction with individual grades (see Evaluations iii below). Our culture does not easily tolerate substituting group for individual recognition.

4. *Roles must be assigned* so that all members are responsible for group processes. Leadership, for instance, is assumed by various members according to their ability to contribute to the task at hand.

5. There should be *group processing goals* so that participants learn basic group and interpersonal skills. Group processing techniques, such as making eye contact, can be particularly useful for ESL learners.

6. Finally, *evaluation criteria* should be clearly stated.

Writing a Cooperative Lesson Plan:

Three Samples

Listed below are samples of cooperative learning lesson plans on three topics : i) cultural plurality , ii) community social services, and iii) biology.

I. Group learning goal

Sample i: A Cultural Lesson: Identify the behaviors in a designated story that illustrate cultural conditioning.

Sample ii: A Lesson on Community Social Services: Write and present to the class a group report on community social services.

Sample iii: A Biology Lesson. Identify the characteristics of a prokaryotic cell.

II. Group processes goal

Samples: i) Practice good listening techniques.

ii) Use conflict resolution skills.

iii) Practice making eye contact.

III. Individual goals (Individual assignments can be adapted to individual levels so that each member contributes to the group goal and experiences a measure of success according to his/her abilities.)

Samples: i) After reading the story, each individual will identify illustrated cultural behaviors that conform to or conflict with his/ her own.

ii) Each group member will research one community social service, acquiring information to share with the group.

iii) Each member will have a different cell characteristic to research and teach to the other members.

IV. Roles

Samples: i) Recorder records important points from the group discussions.

ii) Leader keeps the discussion going by ensuring that everyone participates and no one dominates.

iii) Reporter reports group progress to the entire class.

iv) Synthesizer sums up what is being discussed.

V. Evaluation/ Products

Samples : i) Each group will submit a matrix of cultural behaviors evident in the story and their relation to the cultures of group members. Each member will be prepared to discuss both the behavior and its relation to the cultural norms of group members. Evaluation will be based on cohesiveness of the matrix and accuracy of individual responses.

ii) Each group of four will submit a cogent, well written report on four local social service agencies. The group will serve as a panel, with each member presenting to the class information on his/her research. Evaluation will be based on cohesiveness of the report and the quality of information (verbal and written) provided by the panel.

iii) Individuals within groups will complete a test on the characteristics of prokaryotic cells. Individual grades will be tallied and feed into a composite group grade.

Conclusions

With philosophic and theoretic emphases on group learning and individual empowerment, adult education is ideally suited for cooperative learning, particularly in areas such as ABE and ESL where learners are culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse. Indications are, however, that practice has lagged behind theory in this area. A (1992) government study, for example, found individualized instruction to be the most practiced technique in adult learning programs.

Small group learning, with its attendant problems, is often called cooperative. Lacking the essential elements of cooperative education, such practice usually fails, leading facilitators and learners alike to complain that cooperative learning doesn't work. To be effective, cooperative education must contain six elements: individual accountability, group learning and processing goals, group rewards, assigned roles, and well defined evaluation criteria. According to Johnson (1989), properly practiced cooperative learning can do the following.

1. Minimize and even eliminate class, gender, disability, and ethnic barriers.
2. Enhance achievement.
3. Empower learners and give them a positive impression of their learning activities;
4. Develop interpersonal and group skills.
5. Facilitate active and interesting learning experiences.

Designing and facilitating cooperative learning is worth the time invested in planning and practicing the technique.

References

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